

# ***IOWA OUTDOORS***

**Iowa Department of Natural Resources**  
**www.iowadnr.com**

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**April 1, 2003**

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## **DNR ANNOUNCES FREE CAMPING WEEKEND FOR STATE PARKS**

Des Moines – The Iowa Department of Natural Resources is inviting Iowa residents to camp for free at 53 state park campgrounds on May 2, 3 and 4.

"We would like to encourage Iowans to get outside and experience the recreational opportunities that Iowa's state park system have to offer," said Kevin Szcodronski, interim chief of the state parks bureau. "This is our way of introducing Iowans to the hidden treasures in their own back yard."

Szcodronski said Iowa's natural resources are often under-used in the state and camping is one way to appreciate Iowa's great outdoors. While some state park campgrounds are frequently full during holiday weekends, mid-week camping at most parks is usually available. Additionally, non-holiday weekends are frequently open for camping at out-of-the-way parks.

"We are hoping that a free state park camping weekend will entice more Iowans to camp on a regular basis," said Szcodronski. "The more people participate in outdoor recreation, the more people can appreciate and become stewards our natural resources."

This year, campers, other park visitors and local area residents have the opportunity to attend or participate in a number of interpretive programs and activities statewide during the free camping weekend. Program content ranges from hikes, campfire cooking to wildlife talks.

Along with free camping weekend, the DNR will kick off the second year of "Explore Iowa Parks" which is a program aimed at getting campers out more often to visit Iowa state

parks. Campers can earn prizes while camping at a number of different state parks. Information about the program will be available at all state parks and on the state parks website.

For more information about free camping weekend and Explore Iowa Parks program, go to the DNR parks website at [www.exploreiowaparks.com](http://www.exploreiowaparks.com).

**For more information, contact, Sherry Arntzen at 515-242-6233.**

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## **BROKEN KETTLE BIRD CONSERVATION AREA DEDICATION**

SIOUX CITY –The Iowa Department of Natural Resources (DNR) and Iowa Chapter of The Nature Conservancy (TNC) plan to dedicate the Conservancy's Broken Kettle Grasslands Preserve as Iowa's newest Bird Conservation Area at 1:30 PM on April 11. The event will take place at the Dorothy Pecaut Nature Center, located within Stone State Park at 4500 Sioux River Road/Highway 12, north of Sioux City. Brief presentations will be followed by a driving tour of the preserve and an opportunity for a guided hike.

"Designation of Broken Kettle as Iowa's third official Bird Conservation Area, or BCA, will give national recognition to the area's importance for resident and migratory grassland birds," said Bruce Ehresman, DNR Wildlife Diversity Program biologist. "The area is critical habitat for grassland nesting birds, such as northern harrier, grasshopper sparrow, bobolink, dickcissel, western meadowlark and several other species realizing nationwide declines."

Establishing Bird Conservation Areas in Iowa is a priority for DNR's Wildlife Diversity Program. Part of a larger international effort promoting "all bird conservation," the idea for BCAs grew out of a program called Partners in Flight. This program recognizes that sustaining viable bird populations requires habitat conservation at a large landscape level. A model BCA encompasses at least 10,000 acres and includes a combination of well-managed public and private lands. Broken Kettle BCA includes roughly 4,000 acres of land owned and/or managed by the Conservancy, another 2,000 acres owned by DNR and the Plymouth County Conservation Board, plus additional good habitat on other private lands.

Broken Kettle Grassland becomes Iowa's first Bird Conservation Area anchored primarily by private lands. According to Doug Harr, state coordinator for the Wildlife Diversity Program, the DNR is excited about partnering with The Nature Conservancy and other area landowners. "This is a great example of how habitat can be well-managed for birds without extensive government ownership of land," Harr said.

"The Nature Conservancy is delighted to be part of this effort," said Leslee D. Spraggins, state director for the Conservancy. "We have worked 40 years to get to this historic moment." She points out that The Nature Conservancy is also working in South America to protect the wintering habitat of the grassland birds that visit Iowa in spring and summer.

“This total effort represents a partnership that serves as an excellent example of ways to better conserve all natural resources in Iowa’s unique Loess Hills region,” said Harr. Birdwatching is now among the nation’s fastest-growing outdoor activities and this new BCA might attract birders from around the country, he said. That could enhance the local tourist economy while it also helps the area’s birdlife.

**For more information, contact Ehresman at (515) 432-2823 or Harr at (515) 281-4815.**

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## **WILD SWANS RETURN TO NORTH IOWA**

By Lowell Washburn

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

FERTILE---Iowa's best known pair of wild trumpeter swans has returned to its summer home. For the third consecutive season, the swans are preparing to nest on the west pool of Cerro Gordo County's Mallard Marsh.

The pair's female [band number 5F8] is one the state's most studied wild birds. She was originally released as a juvenile at Mallard Marsh during the summer of 1997. As an adult, she returned to the wetland in March of 2001. On June 10, she and her mate successfully hatched five young.

For area wildlife enthusiasts, the nesting was nothing short of a conservation milestone. It was, in fact, the first successful reproduction of wild swans since the species disappeared from North Iowa more than a century ago.

Life has not always been easy for the Mallard Marsh trumpeters. Last year's nesting season began with tragedy when the pair's male, along with one of the 2001 offspring, was killed by a powerline collision during spring migration. The accident occurred north of Clear Lake, less than 4 miles from the pair's nest site.

Things took a crucial turn for the better when, just four days later, the female was joined by a second male. Considering the minuscule number of wild swans currently roaming the Iowa landscape, this development was in itself rather incredible. Even more astounding was the fact that the "new" pair was able to successfully hatch seven young during 2002. It remains the largest brood of young [cygnets] ever recorded in the history of the trumpeter swan recovery effort. Most waterfowl species, including swans, lose an average of half of their young between hatching and first flight. The Mallard Marsh swans have hatched a total of 12 cygnets during the past two nesting seasons. In spite of frequent interactions with mink, snapping turtles, and river otters, the pair has managed to get 11 of those youngsters to flight stage.

Events of the past several months have proved equally intriguing.

After departing its Mallard Marsh home in late November, the swan family was reported a few days later in southern Iowa. After that, the flock vanished for the remainder of the winter. During the winter of 2000, the female and her mate were known to winter on the flooded rice fields of Arkansas. It is not known, however, if the swans returned to the region this year.

It was another mild winter in Iowa. By mid-February, the weather was warming and northbound geese were on the move. Area bird enthusiasts were anxiously scouring the countryside in hopes of documenting the swans' safe return.

The long awaited report came on Feb. 19 when Fern Midtgaard spotted the swan pair occupying an airhole at the Sandpiper Hills Waterfowl Production Area, located just west of the birds' Mallard Marsh nest site. The swan family had survived another round trip migration marathon. Or had they?

To native North Iowans it came as no surprise when the near record temps of mid-February proved to be a false alarm. By Feb. 20 a massive polar front was sweeping the area. Wind chills dipped to negative numbers, and precious areas of open water were rapidly re-freezing. After a second day without water, the trumpeters called it quits. Just after sunset on Feb. 21 the swans climbed into the crisp evening air and reluctantly headed south.

On the morning of February 22, the Mallard Marsh trumpeter swans were reported on a southern Iowa farm near Osceola.

Spring is returning for a second time to North Iowa. The Mallard Marsh trumpeter swans have also returned, and are currently refurbishing their former nest site. The marsh is ice free now, and the swans are making it no secret that, this time, they intend to stay.

Shortly after sunrise each morning, the pair engages in a series of noisy, trumpeting displays that proclaims in no uncertain terms that, "This corner of the marsh is taken."

But in the case of the Mallard Marsh swans, the haunting courtship calls bear a message that runs even deeper. After an absence of more than 100 years, wild, free flying trumpeters have returned to the North Iowa landscape.

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## **TRUMPETER SWAN RECOVERY IS ON TRACK**

By Lowell Washburn

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

CLEAR LAKE--Efforts to restore vanished populations of wild trumpeter swans to Iowa wetlands is on track and wildlife enthusiasts could see as many as six new pairs establish

breeding territories this spring.

"Iowa trumpeter swans made ten successful nesting attempts last spring which resulted in the production of 42 young," said DNR swan restoration coordinator, Ron Andrews.

"This marked a very healthy increase over the 2001 nesting season when nine swan nests produced a total of 19 young," said Andrews.

The biggest news from last summer's nesting effort was that, for the first time in well over a century, wild trumpeter swans returned to the backwater sloughs of the Upper Mississippi River.

According to Andrews, Iowa-reared swans initiated three nesting attempts on the Mississippi. Two of those nests were located on the Wisconsin side of the channel. All three nests were successful -- resulting in the production of eight young.

"Our recovery goal has been to have a total of 15, free-flying pairs of breeding trumpeter swans by the year 2003," said Andrews.

"Based on neck collar observations of non-breeding, subadult birds reported during the past several months, I think it's possible that we could have as many as five, and maybe even six, new pairs come on line this year. Whether or not that happens remains to be seen, but at this point I'm highly optimistic."

A good share of the current success of Iowa's trumpeter swan recovery can be directly attributed to DNR partnerships involving 55 private sector cooperators, says Andrews.

The DNR places pairs of captive breeder swans on private ponds where volunteer cooperators care for the birds during the nesting season. Any young produced are eventually released into public marshlands. Last year private cooperators produced a total of 145 young swans, which will be released into Iowa wetlands this summer.

"The public support for returning nesting swans to Iowa wetlands has really been incredible," says Andrews.

"To date, we've been able to release just over 450 young birds since the program started in 1995. In addition to returning to Iowa marshes, those birds are also nesting in several other states as well. At this point, I think we'll be releasing birds for another three to four seasons. After that, there will hopefully be enough free flying, breeding pairs to enable the birds to sustain their population.

"So far, it's been a real roller coaster ride with plenty of ups and downs. However, at this point, things are looking great and I'm optimistic that the birds are going to make it."

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## **ICE OUT CATFISHING, COUNTDOWN TO TURKEY SEASON**

By Joe Wilkinson

Iowa Department of Natural Resources

Get it while it's hot...or at least warm. It's barely spring and that lake water is still bone-chilling cold. As the ice goes out, though, it provides a week or so of great catfishing, if you can find the right spots...and tolerate the smell of the bait!

The phenomenon basically works from south to north, through Iowa, as warm weather returns. Sun hitting shallow lake bays creates a 10 or 15 degree difference in water temperatures. To a hungry catfish, that's the equivalent of the clanging dinner bell. "They have gone all winter with little food," explains Department of Natural Resources fisheries biologist Paul Sleeper, based at Lake Macbride. "Now, as the water warms, channel catfish particularly take advantage of winter shad mortality and gorge themselves."

Those gizzard shad, at the northern edge of their range in Iowa, don't tolerate adverse conditions well. As ice thickens during the winter, it can reduce oxygen levels. Shad are the first to die, even when other species show no effects. Floating to the top of the water, the shad are basically encased in ice. As the ice cover disappears, the shad are suddenly available, just as the warmer water fuels the catfish feeding frenzy.

Where to fish? Follow the sun. And the wind. This week, you could see and smell the shad as steady breezes pushed them into windrows on the banks on the Coralville Reservoir.

"Typically, you can look in the shallows, especially where a creek channel comes in," says Sleeper. "The fish are going to go to the warmest water they can find. As the sun hits the mud under those six to 12 inch depths, it really warms up." And while being on board a boat improves your mobility, a well-placed bank angler can do just as well.

Credit the advanced sense of 'smell' that catfish possess for the feeding binge. Put simply, dead shad stink. And catfish detect that scent with their barbels, or whiskers. "They 'taste' the change in the water," says Sleeper. "Anglers simply scoop up as many dead shad as they can find and use them for bait. Some even leave them in the sun for a day, to get even more pungent. The ranker the better." How hungry are these cats? Just about everyone you pull in already has a bulging belly and is looking for more.

As the supply of shad fades and as warmer temperatures spread through out the lake, the catfish will disperse. But not before filling up a lot of live wells or five-gallon pails to take home.

## **FARM PONDS SEE SCATTERED FISH MORTALITY**

As the ice cover comes off farm ponds throughout Iowa, many owners grow alarmed as numbers of dead fish show up. "A lot of fish are floating up now," notes DNR fisheries biologist Paul Sleeper. "Depending on the pond's depth, winter weather and a couple other factors, it happens frequently. A lot of southeast Iowa ponds went into this winter with water levels two to

four feet below normal. With 1½ to 2 feet of ice cover, that noticeably reduced the winter water volume and available oxygen. Some of the biggest fish; grass carp and catfish can be the first to go.”

Sleeper notes that biologists rarely see a good pond with a complete kill-off. “A typical Iowa pond, in good shape, can support 400 to 500 pounds of fish per acre. If you see maybe, 50 or 100 fish that have floated to the top or to shore, realize in the bigger scheme, that’s not a large percentage.” If you suspect a problem beyond that, contact the local fisheries biologist.

## **COUNTDOWN TO TURKEY SEASON**

*Each week for the next four weeks, you can read about a different facet of turkey hunting, as hunters head to the woods for Iowa’s spring ‘big game season’. The first of Iowa’s 2003 turkey seasons begins April 14.*

**Part 1, The Outlook:** There is no doubt. The popularity of spring turkey hunting in Iowa has boomed in the last decade. And hunter success matches that rise. Wildlife officials expect 40,000 or so hunters, spread across Iowa’s four hunting seasons this spring; April 14-17, 18-22, 23-29, 30-May 18. With electronic licensing, you can wait until the day you go out to buy a turkey tag. That flexibility lets you consider weather, days off, hunting with a friend or just changing your mind. Residents are allowed up to two turkey licenses in 2003. The second one must be for use in the fourth season.

Once in the woods, you should see a few more birds. “The brood survey this past year showed an increase of seven to ten percent in the number of poults to hens. Usually, we don’t see more than a two to three percent change,” notes the Department of Natural Resources wildlife biologist Todd Gosselink. “The flock size also increased about five percent statewide. The area north of Interstate 80 had the best reproduction, so there should be lots of birds out there.”

Each season features advantages and disadvantages. Many hunters swear by first season, saying gobblers have not yet been ‘educated’ by unnatural human traffic in the woods. Also, hens are often not quite ready to breed; hiking the prospect of a love-hungry tom rushing over the hill to your hen clucks and ‘puts’. On the other hand, there are only four weekdays in the season; days which can be uncomfortably cold and/or snowy in Iowa. ‘Weekend only’ hunters go for the later season.

In each of the last three years, spring season hunters harvested a little over 20,000 gobblers. Gosselink says the number of hunters in the woods seems to have hit a plateau in the last couple years. He feels that weather—good or bad—will dictate the trend this year. Good weather will probably point to another harvest of just over 20,000 birds.

*In future weeks; ‘Countdown to Turkey Season’ will look at different features in turkey hunting; preseason scouting, use of locator calls, judicious use of turkey calls, hunting early versus late...or both, bad weather hunting, ‘tools of the trade’ and the killing shot.*

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## **OPERATION RELEAF EFFORT SET FOR 2003**

Alliant Energy and the Iowa Department of Natural Resources are offering the Operation ReLeaf Residential Tree Program again this spring in nine regions throughout the state. Applications for Operation ReLeaf are available online at [www.alliantenergy.com](http://www.alliantenergy.com).

Operation ReLeaf is a residential tree planting program funded by Alliant Energy and administered by the Iowa DNR in effort to promote long-term energy and natural resource conservation. The trees are distributed through participating county conservation boards. Dubuque, Cerro Gordo, Guthrie, Linn, Marion, Muscatine, Story, Union and Wapello counties will act as local project coordinators for this season.

Approximately 3,600 trees will be sold for \$25 each and distributed on select Saturday mornings between April 12 and May 31. Participants must be Alliant Energy customers and tree purchase is initially limited at two trees per household. If there are additional trees available on day of distribution, they will be sold at that time. Advance application is required.

**For more information contact Amy Oliver at (515) 281-6749 or by e-mail at [amy.oliver@dnr.state.ia.us](mailto:amy.oliver@dnr.state.ia.us).**

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## **DNR SPRING SALE SET FOR MAY 10**

DES MOINES – The Iowa DNR will hold a spring auction Saturday, May 10, at the Cattle Barn on the Iowa State Fairgrounds. The gates open at 8 a.m. and the auction will begin around 9 a.m. Items up for auction include firearms, boats, outboard motors, chainsaws, mowers, trailers, farm and office equipment and more. The items are sold “as is” with no guarantee or warranty.

The public may view the items for sale from May 7 to 9, from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Any person interested in purchasing a firearm at the auction must have either a valid Iowa permit to acquire pistols or revolvers, a federal firearms license, or a professional or non-professional permit to carry concealed weapons. The Iowa permit to acquire can be obtained from a sheriff’s office. Allow two to three weeks to receive the permit.

Payment must be made on auction day. All sales are final. Firearms must be removed from the site within one half hour after the sale of the firearm is completed. All other items must be removed from the sale site after full payment is made.

Sales taxes will be collected. Boats, snowmobiles, trailers and vehicles will pay taxes to the proper county office when registering those items.



The Iowa DNR reserves the right to reject any bids and withdraw any item from the sale at any time. To receive a copy of the sale bill, send a self addressed stamped envelop to Surplus Sale, Iowa DNR, 502 E. 9<sup>th</sup> St., Des Moines, IA 50319.

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